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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

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This letter of information is rather late in reaching you. Please excuse this. But the news which it now gives it cheering and it also includes some very important ideas.

The study document "A Theological Reflection on the Work of Evangelism" (Division of Studies - Bulletin Vol. V, 1959, No. 1-2) has been sold as follows :

nearly 31.500 copies in English

1.500 copies in German (the German edition is at present exhausted, but new copies are on order)

330 copies in French.

The document has been warmly welcomed in the United States of America. It has proved to be an excellent basis for further intensive discussion concerning the most important theological problems of evangelism.

In what follows we should like to pass on to you some ideas from the Working Committee on Evangelism, concerning its future work. We should be glad to receive your comments.

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DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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ABOUT FUTURE STUDIES ON EVANGELISM

I

The history of ecumenical discussion on evangelism shows that the very moment when questions of methods are approached, questions of theology emerge. Not that methods are unimportant; evangelizing involves a "how" as well as a "what" and a "why". But methods applicable in one area may not apply in another. To a large extent they must depend upon the use of common sense. The Evangelism Department has endeavoured to serve the churches by reporting, often in detail, concrete evangelistic experiments, these serving as stimulus to imitation and trial fitted to local needs. But the experience of the Department, and the requests for help on the part of the churches, have pointed to the need of devoting the Department's primary energies to ecumenical clarification of a basic Theology of Evangelism. A glance at the Table of Contents of the pamphlet "A Theological Reflection on the Work of Evangelism" will illustrate the kind of questions that inevitably emerge when the call to evangelism, in place of remaining merely a pious generality, is subjected to the judgment and clarification of biblical insights and of the corporately shared experience.

Such questioning of basic insights becomes even more needful as the missionary cause and that of Evangelism are brought together in a uniting W.C.C. structure. The very words "Mission" and "Evangelism" are in need of definition, as are such related concepts as "Renewal" and "Revival", not to mention the still surely living significance attached to "Mission" when it reverts to the plural "Missions". A host of quite practical concerns are dependent for effective administration upon clear thinking. The vocation symbolized by the word "study" is at times contrasted unfavourably with "action", but clearly the "study" of the meaning, under the Gospel, of "mission" - the latter a concept itself implying action to the possible limit of martyrdom - can be guarded against mere academic theologizing.

Some of the questions which loom on the horizon at once when we confront the problem of clarifying our understanding of "Mission and Evangelism" could be the following :

1) What actually is the difference between missions and evangelism ? Is the difference real, or merely the result of the way these terms have gathered historical connotations around their use ? What is that use ?

2) If substitution of one term for the other indiscriminately is justified, is there danger that the impulse to proclaim the Gospel to "those that are far" may be weakened, since a congregation's immediate environment ("those that are near") can monopolise attention ?

3) What are the dimensions of "the missionary task of the Church" ?

4) Is a revivalistic effort in a local congregation or area a "missionary" effort ?

5) Is it true to say that "the Church is the Mission" ? If true, should some of the activities which occupy much, if not most, of the energy of our churches submit to radical judgment ?

6) If, with the increasing growth of the "younger churches", the home base for missions is "everywhere", is a call to send missionaries to geographically distant areas still a proper call ?

II

Keeping in mind the continuing need for clarifying and deepening our understanding of what, under the Gospel, Missions and Evangelism should mean, the Department on Studies in Evangelism suggests as proper for further exploration a field of study which continues ecumenical discourse, already fruitfully begun, but which presents many unanswered questions and unresolved tensions. (Acquaintance with the pamphlet "A Theological Reflection on the Work of Evangelism" will illustrate the fact that the following proposals are indeed a continuance of recent rewarding ecumenical sharing of insights and therefore already in preliminary preparatory stage). This proposed field of study cannot be outlined in perfected detail. But, by way of generalized description it would involve the following three major concerns :

1) A long-range study of the relationship between "Church" and "Gospel" in Evangelism. That a call to baptism and to incorporation into the Body of Christ is part of true Gospel-proclamation no one will question. But to identify evangelism with "church-membership promotion" can lead to grave misunderstandings of the Gospel itself and of the Church's primary witnessing vocation. Christians do often give the impression that they are interested in the man in the street only in so far as he may become a man in the pew.

Evangelism, when thus centered on promotion of the institutional prosperity of a congregation, can lead to overemphasizing to the point of idolatry the importance of the evangelizing group as a substitute for the message it has to proclaim. The outsider is invited not only to accept the "good news of the Kingdom", with its consequent incorporation into the Body of Christ, but is also expected to emigrate from the social structures of his world and to immigrate into the as yet alien witnessing community with all its "cultural baggage".

This is, indeed, a complex issue which calls for clarification. Matthew 23:15 may well apply : "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves".

In recent years the churches have become increasingly aware that there will be no authentic fellowship and unity across denominational

lines so long as denominations have not ceased to "proselytise" among the members of other Christian groups. On more than one occasion the WCC has drawn attention to the fact that ecumenism and "proselytism" are mutually exclusive. (See "Christian Witness, Proselytism, and Religious Liberty in the Setting of the World Council of Churches"). It is hoped that these studies of Proselytism, under the care of a special Commission of the WCC will be continued. While the Department of Evangelism is grateful for this study of Proselytism as this is related to the problem of religious liberty, it deems it of importance to study the subject, in its turn, and from its own point of view, in relation to the specific task of missions and evangelism.

Recent Biblical insights have revealed that proselytism, when its meaning is enlarged, may be the exact opposite of true evangelism and missions. In many countries the revival of the old religions of the land has made people suspicious of all forms of Christian witness. Missions are often considered to be illegitimate cultural and imperialistic "proselytism". This is an area in which the issue of the relationship between "Church" and "Gospel" needs clarification.

There are many traces of Proselytism, as thus defined, in our missionary and evangelistic work. The churches are tempted to subtle self-aggrandizement. Radical self-examination is called for.

Among the questions which this issue raises, the following might be suggested :

(1) What is the meaning of the fact that, in proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, those to be addressed are "nations" (Matthew 28:18) ? Is it legitimate to interpret for our time the symbol "nations" as "social solidarities" or "social structures" ? If so, what does this mean for missionary and evangelistic work ?

(2) In how far is the witnessing community more than an <u>instrument</u> for the proclamation of the Gospel ?

(3) What precisely can incorporation into the fellowship of believers mean when it is not carefully distinguished from conformity to "Christian culture" ?

(4) What is the danger of identifying missions and evangelism with the building up of "church membership" ?

(5) It has been frequently suggested that the difference between "proselytism" and evangelism is one of attitude and perspective. How can this difference be defined as it manifests itself in contrasted attitudes toward the world, the Church, the Gospel, and the meaning of history ?

2) A study of the missionary structure of the congregation. (See "A Theological Reflection", pages 30 and following).

A Consultation on Evangelism held at the Ecumenical Institute in July, 1960, marked the opening of a major discussion of this topic, but this Consultation was only a beginning, comparable to first steps in the long consultation process which culminated in the production of the "Theological Reflection" pamphlet. The Consultation had before it in quite concrete form the question : "To what degree do the existing patterns of church life affect the act of proclamation ? Is there, in fact, need for a revival or renewal of church life and of change in certain of its structures to make relevant and effective witness to the Gospel possible ?".

This question of the witness to the Gospel of the corporate life of a congregation becomes acute when it faces the prospect of opening its doors to the outsider. The outsider is already frequently a sharer in group life in the secular world - a labour union or a work group or a "teen-age gang", or a neighbourhood athletic club. There he finds the reward of fellowship; he is known by name, is accorded the dignity of being permitted to speak and to be listened to. Ultimately, to be sure, none of these fellowships may satisfy his deepest needs. Rootlessness and the fate of the wanderer and suffering the loss of personal freedom in subjection to the power structures of a technological society hover in the background. But every congregation is called upon to become a fellowship so clearly witnessing to Christian brotherhood (Ephesians 4) that it can witness as from community to community. Surveys of evangelism in area after area report the despair of many an evangelizing effort directed to the outsider as this confronts the problem of introducing the convert to life within a local congregation.

The consideration of this need to place the corporate life and structures of the churches under the judgment of the call to proclaim the Gospel can give rise to many questionings. Among these are :

(1) Can renewal of the fellowship life within church walls take place unless a congregation becomes an agency of witness to the world outside church walls ? How can the fear of leaving the sheltered life within to risk witness outside be overcome ?

(2) Are the Laity in our churches sufficiently alerted to the fact that they are "the Church in the world" and thus the Church's most important evangelists ? How can the Laity receive equipment for their high evangelizing vocation ?

(3) What has the fellowship of Christians in a congregation to offer by way of witness that can differentiate it from community life in the secular world ? Is God, whose care is for all mankind, possibly forming a people outside church walls doing His will better than professed Christians ?

(4) "The Church will rediscover itself only in small groups". Is this insight true ? What differentiates the experience of fellowship in a small group, or Christian "cell", from participation only in institutionalized congregational life ? (See I Corinthians 14:26 ff). But what are the dangers of the "cell movement" in our churches ?

(5) Have the churches in our time, overwhelmed by the complexities of our era of social change, lost the sense of expectancy and the courage to endure the pain of renewal ? Are we building walls of protection against the world (the mission compound or enclosed religious circle, or a middle class ghetto) within which we can indulge in nostalgia for a vanishing "Christian" culture ?

3) Becoming fully aware of the crying need for "the renewal of the Church" inevitably leads us back to the fundamental need for rediscovery of the authentic Gospel itself. If the true Gospel is heard and obeyed, can our structures and institutional agencies remain untouched by the call to Mission ? (Cf. Luke 5:31-32 : "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"). A rediscovery of the full Gospel message will clearly also mean reexamination of the call addressed to the outsider inviting him to commitment and decisions. The Consultation on Evangelism held in July, 1960 revealed the presence among us of an, as yet unresolved tension on this issue. There are those who hold that the Gospel is one addressed primarily to the individual, inviting him to a surrender to Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. Such conversion is not presented as an experience he is to enjoy for himself alone. It is to result in what is usually described as "bringing others to Christ". In other words, the convert is to become an evangelist in his turn. Nor does it fail to urge upon the convert participation in service to the world. But the evangelism which anchors itself in this interpretation of the Gospel does emphasize the Gospel's answer to the individual's personal needs for forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ.

The other interpretation of the Gospel, while not denying its profound relevance to personal salvation, insists that this Gospel, to which response is to be made has not yet been truly heard, so that acceptance will be fully responsible and the evangelist's vocation truly fulfilled, unless Jesus Christ has been presented as Lord of the World and Lord of the Church as well as personal Saviour. Conversion will consequently mean not only a convert's transformation into a witness participating in personal evangelism but participating in the battle between forces of right against forces of evil <u>in the world</u>, sharing in this battle as the forces of evil confront the Christian in the form of social structures as well as in the form of as yet unconverted individuals. Consideration of this tension and how it can be resolved constitutes an invitation to ecumenical study and bold yet loving sharing of convictions and insights. Many questions can be suggested for detailed exploration. Among these may well be :

(1) Is a personal decision and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church and of the World essential in a renewal of the churches as this renewal involves its members ? Is merely "joining a church" or commitment to "religion in general" in danger of robbing the Church of its power to witness to the authentic Gospel ? How far is preaching for personal decision and commitment still a necessity when we consider the large number of merely nominal members in our churches ?

(2) Is there still a place within the Church's corporate life for the "charismatic evangelist" (one under a special calling and endowed with special spiritual gifts - see Ephesians 4:11) ? What should be the Church's responsibility for the work of the "charismatic evangelist" ? What should be the evangelist's responsibility to the Church ?

(3) Can the concept "revival", or even "revivalism", receive a meaning as distinct from "renewal" ?

III

The Department of Evangelism is under the handicap of seeing its publications frequently buried in its files. It seeks help in finding ways of reaching the ecumenical constituency and the agencies of evangelism to whom they were addressed. Furthermore, all study of evangelistic experiments and ventures into new areas of need are fruitful only if they had to further experiments. The question as to where new experiments can be encouraged and new ventures launched should be the concern of all churches. The Department welcomes news of pioneering ventures and evaluations of their effectiveness. The dissemination of news in this field of evangelistic work is an ongoing project of the Department.

IV

The Department has performed its most useful service to the churches during the past six years by sponsoring, as noted earlier, Study Conferences which united to mutual sharing of insights (and tensions) representatives of evangelistic concern from all parts of the globe. It trusts that it can be encouraged to continue this tradition. It is hopefully looking forward to sponsoring sequels to the Consultations of the recent past - most importantly a new and enlarged conference of evangelists and missionaries which can continue the exploration of the field of concern sketched in this Report.

V

Among more specific projects of study which the Department has accepted for the near future is a study lasting about five or six years on "The Use of the Bible in Evangelism". This study is being undertaken in collaboration with the United Bible Societies, the latter generously offering to finance the study project. It is a sequel to a study similarly sponsored and activated during the years between Evanston and New Delhi entitled "The Use of the Bible in the Life of the Churches".